



PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN PRISONERS IN THE PRISON WE BROKE BY BABY KAMBLE

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ABSTRACT

The present paper titled 'Portrayal of Women Prisoners in The Prison We Broke by Baby Kamble' concentrates on the experiences and challenges encountered by the Dalit women in Indian patriarchal society which are obviously different, intense and multidimensional. Man being a social animal cannot deny his birth and status in the society. He accepts or denies he is born with the tag of caste and culture. Thus 'Caste' is omnipresent and omnipotent in Hindu society. Baby Kamble explores woman's life in the Dalit Community. The study discusses on the resistance and liberalisation of Dalit women towards hunger, poverty, child marriage and caste based humiliation. It even explains how the impact of Ambedkar brought radical changes in the lives of Dalits.

Introduction:

Dalit literature emerged in the 1960s and 70s with the publication of poems, short stories, novels, dramas and autobiographies express the suppression and oppression caused due to the caste based discrimination. Dalit Autobiography holds a mirror to the agony experienced by an individual, gives a voice against casteism and wish for an egalitarian society. Arjun Dangle rightly opines that "Dalit is not a caste but realisation and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society". There are many Dalit men autobiographies the first of its kind is Hazari's *Untouchable: The autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1951), DP Das's *The Untouchable Story* (1985), Balwant Singh's *An Untouchable in the IAS* (1997), D.R. Jatava's *A silent Soldier: An autobiography* (2000) and Shymala's *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (2001). All these have been written in English who were lucky enough to avail good English education but majority of them have written in their regional language which later got translated to English. The well-known translated autobiographies are Laxman Mane's *Upura* (1997), Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* (1998), Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Out Caste* (2003), Narendra Jadhav's *Out Caste: A Memoir* (2003), Vasant Moon's *Growing Up Untouchable in India* (2001), and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003).

It is noteworthy that numbers of Dalit Women autobiographers are less in number compared to their men counterpart as they have been deprived of education. Sumitra Bhavne and other eight Dalit women narrated their stories which became famous as "narrated autobiographies". Originally it was in Marathi and later translated into English by Gauri Deshpande known as *Pan On Fire*. The other narrated autobiography is *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (1997). Later there is an increase in number of Dalit Women autobiographies but written in regional language. To name some of them Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawde *Antasphot-Thoughtful Outburst* (1981), Mukta Sarvagod, Hira Bansode, Urmila Pawar *The Weave of My Life* (2009), Bama Karukku (1992), Sumitra Bhavne's *Pan On Fire* (1998), *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (1997), Baby Kamble *The Prison We Broke* (2008), Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2009). Baby Kamble's autobiography throws light on self-assertion. It is a socio cultural analysis of the society. She voices against the Hindu caste system which dehumanized dalits for centuries and praises Dr. Ambedkar who fought for his people and brought a drastic revolution. Baby Kamble was brought up in this transition movement and has witnessed the ordeal of dalit women in the pre and Post Ambedkar period. It is not only the story of dalit women prisoners but about the fighter in her who broke her shackles to assert herself. Kamble had a better opportunity to lead a better life in comparison to her mother. Her mother was never allowed to go out of the threshold. In the words of Kamble, "My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage" (5). Baby was well known in her locality among the Maharwada of Veergaon. The fifteen to sixteen houses were like family to her where she roamed around calling mama and mami. Mahars led a very pathetic life due to poverty. They were the poorest among the poor with nothing to eat and nothing to wear. The huts were made up of stones arranged vertically with some mud coating and being banished from the society they were forced to lead a cloistered life. They used utensils made up of clay to store water and coconut shell used as a cup for drinking water. It was not easy to drink water from it as there were three holes in the shell. Every time one has to cover the holes by finger to drink it properly. Though Mahars were expelled from the society and treated like dirt by Hindus still they lovingly followed Hindu culture and Hindu rituals. Even in their arant poverty they indulged in the rituals of as hadh month. It was the golden opportunity for Mahar women to get revenge against their husbands by getting possessed by Gods. Men afraid of the possessed God were ready to fulfill all their wives demand and even touched their feet. Mahars were encircled by so many superstitious beliefs that nobody tried to free them from those practices and they blindly followed for their doom. Baby in a rebellious tone protests the discrimination done on them by upper caste from generation to generation. The

awful life lead by the Mahars engulfed with the filth and dirt, the lack of education and superstitious practices, poverty and helplessness stings her soul. There was nobody to share their pains and sorrows. They were even deprived of the use of soaps and suffered all sorts of epidemics. Upper caste people who enjoyed all the privileges were responsible for their animal like existence. They never treated them like humans but encouraged them to become animal like. The Mahars were not given any work so they were forced to beg for food. The staled food was thrown on them which they ate as a sumptuous food.

Mahar women were very protective about the kumkum on their foreheads. The irony was that, these masters of kumkum bestowed nothing but grief and suffering. Still these women looked up high to this as a precious Kohinoor diamond. Among the illiterates only Baby's grandfathers were educated and spoke excellent English as they were working for European Sahibs as butlers. Hence Baby's family was seen in respect by others and everybody looked them in awe. Baby's grandmother received ten rupees every month and was able to help her people in many difficult times. Kamble's heart bleeds for her people who lead beastly life. Her neighbor's hair which looked like a basket turned upside down on their heads without combing and oil application. Baby cries out "we were imprisoned in dark cells, our hands and feet bound by the chain of slavery" (49).

Mahar women collected the leftover food from Maratha households by cleaning their animal pens. Every woman of Mahar sang an aspirational song that there future would be bright enough while grinding stone. Her children were left alone soon as she needed to earn for her family. Children are brought up without any earning hands of their parents, without any monitoring eyes and they would hurt themselves. When their mothers return with bundles of firewood on their heads they would follow. Women who had drenched with sweat in the scorching Sun many days dint have anything to eat. As Kamble witnesses: "having had no breakfast in the morning and with no food in the house, hunger gnawed at their empty stomach like wild fire (52). Many times it was Kamble's grand ma who helped these hard working hungry ladies with dried bhakris. The bhakris which they relished with onions were so hard that it sounded like machine thundering in some factory. The collected firewood by women were later cut into small pieces and carried to the village for sale. The Mahars were not allowed to use the main road that was used by the higher castes. When they found any upper castes in the opposite direction they were supposed to vacate the road and climb down into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the road side. The next important thing a Mahar lady should perform without fail was that she needed to cover herself fully when faced by upper caste men and say, "The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master. This was like a chant, which they had to repeat innumerable times even to a small child if it belonged to a upper caste" (52). If this routine was missed by any newlywed girl in the group then she was to face the rage not only of the maters but of her in laws, neighbors and relatives. So it was like a custom followed from many generations. Even there was a customary dress code for Mahar women. Their Saries were made up of cloth stitched out of rags patched up together. Their pallav reached to their knees and a veil fell over their forehead. The Mahar women were denied of wearing the border so they had to tuck it hidden as it was only the privilege of high caste women. Their foreheads were smeared with huge kumkum marks. When they reached the upper caste home they were supposed to stand in the far off corner of the platform and call out, 'kaki and firewood! The Mahar women are here with fire wood' (54). The Upper caste lady would bargain for lower price then the Mahar lady had to stack wood very carefully checking no trace of her hair or thread from her saris not to pollute their house. For all the kind services done she was thrown with the coins to avoid the touch of pollution. Kamble calls Hinduism as a beastly thing for creating the concept of pollution. It is with the sweat and blood of Mahars that upper castes lead a comfortable life. It was the Mahar's ignorance that, they were subjected to the bad treatment by the Upper caste. Again and again they were tormented by the

whip of pollution. "The one who has transformed them from beasts to human beings is the architect of our constitution that shining jewels of sheel and satwa Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar" (56).

The Mahar women suffered more in her unhygienic delivery. It's absolutely rebirth as she would battle with death without any proper care and nursing. The new born was cleaned with the saliva of elders. "Many young girls on the threshold of life succumbed to death. One in every ten lost their lives during child birth. Infants died as well" (61). Thousands of generations were ruined and their sacrifices were ignored. Till 1930 they were in dark and their animal like existence turned towards humanity by Buddha and Bhimraja. Bhimaraja awakened and enlightened his ignorant people by organizing meeting in Jatras. The words of this Oracle Bhim were very heart touching to Mahars. He made them to realize the importance of education and the role of superstitions in their fall. He ignited the fire of living in them and said, "We are humans, we too have the right to live as human beings" (65). Babasaheb worked hard to bring revolution among his people. The main call of his was to educate children, stop eating dead animals and non-belief in gods and religion. He sets as the God of Mahars and pioneer in revolution and people began to change themselves gradually. Kamble's grandparents followed him divinely. Without education Mahar girls were married early and were tortured in their in laws house. Mothers- in law were so jealous of their daughters- in law that they always found faults in them and poisoned their sons against them. Even they were subjected to wife battering, being a small girl it was difficult to survive with them. If she had been successful to escape from her in-laws she would have been packed back very soon. Mutilation of nose of a wife was common among them in 1940s the girl chopped of her nose were called muddy and was not allowed in any good homes. Thus the innocent girl was tormented mentally and physically while the husbands were remarried. "The life of the women in the lower castes was thus shaped by the fire of calamities. This made their bodies strong, but their minds cried out against this oppression" (102).

Even the girls were ill-treated if Mahar women did not draw their pallavs forward from the forehead down to the nose. The trapped women were thus rescued by the Hindu code bill by the great savior Baba sahib. Baby says, "it is because of him that my pen can scribble some thoughts it is because of him that, I understood truth that I can now see how morality is being trampled upon. It is because of him that I got the inspiration to join the struggle against oppression and contribute my small might to it" (102). Baby Kamble is grateful to the Veergaon and the people who nurtured her with love and affection. She was very homely with everyone. Only in their home tea was prepared and they were seen in awe by the rest of the Mahars. When she was eight or nine years she was moved to her parents in Phaltans. Her father was contractor but saved nothing as he was known for his generosity. From her childhood she was greatly influenced by Baba's personality and qualities. "Our young minds were absorbed. Baba's various names- Dr. Ambedkar, Bhimraj, Baba Saheb- became holy chants for us" (106). Thus Kamble was sent to school for the first time by her father to school no 2 and she was enchanted by Baba's philosophy and his writings. Her brother joined politics and all the time her father spoke of Baba. Kamble remembers her school going days when she along with her friends had taught a lesson to the upper class girls who had hurled stones and thrown dust into their eyes. This revolt had come to the young girls by the influence of Baba's words. Later Baba's birth anniversary April 14th became a festive day of celebrations. "I made a firm resolve at a young age, to lead my life according to the path sketched by Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar, the light of my life. His principles have exercised a strong influence on me" (115). She chose to lead a clean life with self-respect and dignity. Even she made her family to follow the path of righteousness. Baby is thankful to Baba for providing them education. Because of education they were able to become rich and achieve the higher post. But she is sad that educated Dalits have forgotten Baba and his principles. She voices to follow Baba's life and serve others. Kamble remembers the life time struggle of Ambedkar to get them humanity, education and the religion of Buddha. Kamble aspires the younger generation to follow, the footsteps of Ambedkar, and give stress to the development of character, truth and morality. She feels, "character is the pillar of this constitution, truth is its roof and morality, its foundation. This is the home of humanity" (123). Being a daughter of activist father she had attempted with her friends to enter the Radha Krishna temple. Kamble was married at the age of 13. Even her husband followed the words of Baba and did business. They started with a grocery store and earned well. All her children are well educated and are in good post. Finally Kamble was able to break her prison. "Baba's words showed me the way. I decided to begin my struggle through my writing I followed Baba's advice verbatim to the best of my ability" (135). Baby Kamble started an Ashram Shala for Orphans from the backward castes. She became the president of Mahatma Phule, DnyanVikas, PrasarakSanastha and her dream to serve the community has come true.

Kamble strongly appreciates the contributions of Maharwomen which was immense. They dared to send their children to school and thus by educating them they broke their own prison. Even they actively participated in Dalit political movement. Baby Kamble had written her autobiography and hidden for twenty long years as her husband was like any other man of community who considered her as an inferior being and called her an ignorant woman. Even she remembers an instance when her hubby slapped and hit her in a train as some guys were staring at her. He was very suspicious and she struggled hard to prove her innocence. She was very patient and constructive in her thoughts. Only he scowled where as she had received good words from other members of the society. Her people were

her strength even her father and brother were very supportive to achieve something in her life. Kamble in an interview given to Maya Pandit opines: "Women are still slaves. And it is not just Dalit women; I see around me many women from both upper and lower castes. All women are facing problems. Especially, women from villages! Their oppressions does not come to light. All cases of the rape are suppressed for fear of family honour, pressures from the dominant communities and political parties. Women works very hard and yet face so many problems in spite of slight improvement in the financial position" (154). Baby Kamble's writing is inspired by the Dalit deity, Dr. BabaSaheb Ambekdar. She is able to articulate only because of his motivational words which had a long lasting impact not only on her mind and heart but on her soul from the childhood. Thus she confesses, "The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore Jina Amucha was autobiography of my entire community" (157). Dalit Women are doubly oppressed being a woman first and then being a Dalit woman. Along with caste based social, cultural and economic marginalization. Kamble as a Dalit Woman writer tries to assert her rights, strive for self-identity with new attitude aspires for revolution and transformation of Hindu society. Her autobiography is all about women suffering and how they free themselves from the prison of poverty, caste, class and gender oppression.

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